

Frank Lucas Dies at 88; Drug Kingpin Depicted in ‘American Gangster’

By Robert D. McFadden

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As the Vietnam War raged in the late 1960s and early '70s, a potent heroin called “Blue Magic” flooded into Harlem and Newark from a mysterious Southeast Asian connection. It destroyed lives, and it turned a black gangster named Frank Lucas into one of America’s most notorious drug kingpins.

His life of crime — rising from poverty to riches in an enterprise that succeeded beyond his wildest dreams — was portrayed in 2007 in Ridley Scott’s film “American Gangster,” with Denzel Washington as Mr. Lucas and Russell Crowe as the prosecutor who brought him down.

The movie was a Hollywood composite of fact and fiction, depicting Mr. Lucas as a daring, imaginative criminal who set up the Asian connection, smuggled heroin in the coffins of service personnel killed in action, and broke into the Mafia’s long domination of narcotics in the New York area — all claims made by Mr. Lucas that have been challenged by investigators and journalists.

Even so, the story of Frank Lucas, who died on Thursday night in Cedar Grove, N.J., at 88, is a larger-than-life tale of ambition, organization and ruthless brutality.

By his own account, he ordered and committed murders, bribed personnel in Vietnam to set up a heroin connection and paid corrupt police officers \$200,000 a week. He hobnobbed with Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, James Brown and Diana Ross, and spent lavishly on cars, clothing, jewelry and entertainment.

At the peak of his empire, he claimed he was taking in \$1 million a day, had \$52 million stashed in Cayman Islands banks and \$300 million in stockpiled heroin, and owned office buildings in Detroit, a cattle ranch in North Carolina and apartments in New York, Miami, Los Angeles and Puerto Rico.

It all collapsed in 1975. Arrested at his New Jersey home, where \$584,000 in cash was found, he was convicted of federal drug charges in New York and state charges in New Jersey and sentenced to 70 years in prison.



Denzel Washington as Mr. Lucas in Ridley Scott's 2007 film, "American Gangster."
David Lee/Universal Pictures

He served only seven years, however, after providing information that led to the convictions of scores of associates and crooked officials.

His death was confirmed by his nephew Aldwan Lassiter in a telephone interview.

Mr. Lucas's survivors include four daughters, Francine Lucas-Sinclair and Ruby, Betty and Candace Lucas; two sons, Frank Jr. and Tony Walters; many grandchildren and great-grandchildren; two sisters, Mattie Lassiter and Emma Moye; and three brothers, Ezell, Lawrence and LeVon Lucas. His wife, Julie, and another son, Ray, died before him.

Richard M. Roberts, who led the prosecution of Mr. Lucas in New Jersey, had befriended him in recent years but was under no illusions about what he did long ago. "In truth," Mr. Roberts told The New York Times in 2007, "Frank Lucas has probably destroyed more black lives than the K.K.K. could ever dream of."

Frank Lucas was born in La Grange, N.C., on Sept. 9, 1930, to Fred and Mahalee (Jones) Lucas. He had almost no formal education, and as a boy he mugged drunks. At 15 he assaulted a man, stole \$400 and fled to New York. He was soon gambling and selling drugs in Harlem; his crimes later escalated to armed robberies.

He established street credibility in 1966 by shooting a notoriously tough drug dealer on a crowded sidewalk four times in the head. "Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!" he told Mark Jacobson for a 2000 New York magazine profile that was a basis for "American Gangster." He was never prosecuted for that crime, which he later denied committing.

But he had caught the eye of Ellsworth Johnson, who controlled gambling and extortion rackets in Harlem. Mr. Lucas claimed that Mr. Johnson, who was known as Bumpy, became his mentor. Others disputed this. But after Mr. Johnson died in 1968, Mr. Lucas developed his lucrative criminal enterprise.

In accounts to the authorities, he said that to break the Mafia monopoly on heroin supplies, which were sold in Harlem and Newark by black dealers, he flew to Thailand and met Leslie Atkinson, known as Ike, a North Carolinian married to one of Mr. Lucas's cousins. He said that Mr. Atkinson, who ran a Bangkok bar and sold drugs to black soldiers, agreed to help.

In the Golden Triangle, at the borders of Thailand, Burma and Laos, Mr. Lucas said, they made a deal with a Chinese-Thai man named Luchai Rubiwat, who grew poppies and processed opium into almost pure heroin. Mr. Lucas said he bought 132 kilos, or 290 pounds, for \$4,300 a kilo. In Harlem, he said, the Mafia would have charged \$50,000 a kilo, which would sell for \$300,000 on the street.

Mr. Lucas in Manhattan with his wife, Julie, and his son Ray. Late in life he promised to promote education and dedicated his autobiography, "Original Gangster" (2010), to his family and to "all the kids who will read it." David Howells/Corbis, via Getty Images

Disguised as an Army officer, Mr. Lucas said, he organized a network of bribed soldiers to move heroin to an air base in Vietnam, from which the bodies of servicemen were flown home. He said he hired a carpenter to build coffins with false bottoms to conceal heroin.

Mr. Atkinson later disputed Mr. Lucas's account; the heroin, he said, was smuggled in teak furniture in an operation he controlled. Ron Chepesiuk, the author of the book "Superfly: The True Untold Story of Frank Lucas, the American Gangster" (2007), contended in a 2008 article in the online journal New Criminologist that Mr. Atkinson, not Mr. Lucas, had made the connection. He also quoted investigators as saying that many of Mr. Lucas's claims were bogus.

But the movie reflected Mr. Lucas's account of coffins arriving at military bases in the United States, where confederates retrieved the heroin and moved it to Harlem. There, Mr. Lucas said, the drug was cut from 98 percent purity to 10 or 12 percent, double the strength of other brands on the streets.

His "Blue Magic" sold primarily on West 116th Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, and the area became an open supermarket for drugs.

Investigated by task forces of federal, state and city authorities in New York and New Jersey, Mr. Lucas was arrested in a raid at his home in Teaneck, N.J., on Jan. 28, 1975. Despite the murders of two witnesses who had testified against him before a grand jury, Mr. Lucas was convicted in federal court in New York and in Essex County, N.J.

His cooperation in a wider inquiry led to his release in 1982. He was convicted of new drug charges in 1984 and imprisoned until 1991.

His illicit assets were confiscated by the government in the 1970s, and he lived anonymously in the federal witness protection program for years. He was a paid consultant for "American Gangster." With Aliya S. King, he wrote an autobiography, "Original Gangster," published by St. Martin's Press in 2010.

Living in Newark and using a wheelchair in recent years, he professed remorse for his crimes and helped his daughter in an organization that aided children of imprisoned parents. He promised to use the proceeds from his book to promote education, and dedicated the book to his family and to "all the kids who will read it."

"Please learn from my mistakes," he admonished young readers. "Stay in school, finish high school and earn the highest degree in education that you can. This is the way to go in life."

Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.

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